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Q&A

How did you become involved in doing research?

Last year I was awarded an Undergraduate Research Award which afforded me the opportunity to go to London and perform research in the British National Archives at Kew. I then presented my research at the Undergraduate Research Symposium and submitted it to the *Journal of Undergraduate Research*. This year, my second grant allowed me to perform research in Paris, France at the Alliance Israélite Universelle archives.

How is the research process different from what you expected?

I found that research takes a lot of personal curiosity as well as the ability to encounter pieces of information and distinguish its importance from a larger body of information. Also the ability to synthesize research into an argument is a major part of the research process.

What is your favorite part of doing research?

My favorite part of doing research is the feeling I get when I discover something new and use the historical context to create my own arguments and to ask my own questions about a certain topic or issue.

Exile from Exile: The Moroccan Jewish Cultural Exile and Experience Under French Colonial Rule—1912-1960's

Joseph Siess

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to isolate the environmental, social and political changes occurring in Morocco as a result of European influences, and to examine the ramifications upon the Moroccan Jewish identity. These European influences include: French colonial penetration and Zionism. Synonymous with my senior honors thesis, this research relies upon archival research performed at the Alliance Israélite Universelle archives in Paris, France, as well as literary

sources authored by Moroccan born Jewish authors, including esteemed authors Edmond Amran el-Maleh and Ruth Knafo Setton. The archival component of this research examines these environmental, social and political changes through a Franco-Jewish lens, while the literary component acts to personalize the effects of these influences upon the Moroccan Jewish identity as subjectively as possible. The goal of this research is to contribute to the field of scholarship concerning Moroccan Jewish identity, and

notions of identity in general, as well as to promote contemporary Moroccan Jewish literature as an important primary source base. The hope is that this research will open up the forum concerning broader notions of identity, and the ways in which identity transforms and adapts under specific circumstances, such as European colonial influence.

BACKGROUND/METHODS

French colonialism in Morocco was an experience shared by both its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants, who

were surrounded by the same walls separating the conquered from the conqueror. The French conquest of Morocco, a physical and cultural conquest, caused Moroccans—both Muslim and Jew—to reconstruct their cultural, national, and ethnic identities. By the time the French left Morocco in 1956, Moroccan Jews faced a second challenge to their identity as they found themselves caught in the middle between the fervent influx of Arab nationalism and the Zionist movement, not fully accepted by either. The Alliance Israélite Universelle, a Jewish humanitarian organization based in Paris, France, existed in Morocco 50 years prior to French colonial penetration. The Alliance Israélite Universelle, supported by the French government, built a network of schools throughout North Africa with the aspiration of providing a quality European education for their coreligionists. Zionism as well was present in Morocco only a short time after its politicization at the Basel conference in 1897, and its influence reached its peak in the years following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. This research relies on literary sources, written by Moroccan born Jewish authors, as well as archival research performed at the Alliance Israélite Universelle archives in Paris, France. The archival component of this project provided information about the activities of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, and by extension, the French protectorate, as well as the effects of Zionism on the Moroccan Jewish identity. This research aims to outline the effects of the factors that led to this reconstruction of Moroccan Jewish identity culminating in the ultimate mass exodus of Moroccan Jewry after Moroccan independence in 1956.

Finally, this research also aims to personalize the effects these events had upon the Moroccan Jewish identity through a Moroccan Jewish literary lens. Thus, reflected in Moroccan Jewish literature, the Moroccan Jewish identity may be characterized as the phenomenon of dual exile, in which the authors' identities are being challenged from multiple angles simultaneously.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This article focuses on the Jews of Morocco, and it may be argued that before the fall of the Western Caliphate, the Arab Maghreb and Muslim Spain existed as a greater cultural milieu that defined the Mediterranean Jewish world.¹ This research, as a component of my senior honors thesis, depicts the decimation of the Moroccan Jewish world via factors including French colonial and Zionist influence, and this article focuses on Moroccan Jewish literature as a way to personalize the archival component of this research. Within this article, the writings of two Moroccan Jewish authors, Edmond Amran el-Maleh and Ruth Knafo Setton, will be incorporated into the broader historical narrative.

El-Maleh, born in Safi in 1917, 5 years after the establishment of the French Protectorate in Morocco, experienced firsthand the exile that characterizes his identity. El-Maleh writes from exile in France, and in his writings he stresses a sense of exile that assumes a dualistic nature, namely his physical exile from his home in Morocco, and also in a more abstract sense, exile from Israel. El-Maleh, as a militant, communist anti-colonialist fighting alongside his fellow Moroccans for independence,

essentially writes from the vantage point of a privileged observer, "equally at home and equally exiled from the various societies he frequents."² El-Maleh's writings depict the chaotic phenomenon of "double colonization simultaneously... that of Morocco by France, and that of a vulnerable Moroccan Jewry by Ashkenazic Israel."³ This notion of double colonization, or the dualistic nature of this unique strain of exile, is also apparent within the writings of Moroccan-born author, Ruth Knafo Setton. For Setton, her exile is emphasized by her Sephardic heritage, which is embellished by the pride she has for her Moroccan cultural roots.

In Setton's writings, a different kind of dualism is apparent. Setton grew up in the United States, with one foot in the old world (Morocco) and the other in the new. Setton depicts the alienation she feels amongst the Ashkenazi Jews she encounters in France and the United States, as well as the alienation she feels as a Jew, and especially as a woman, in Morocco, the land of her birth. Setton does not speak Arabic, and communicates with her family in Morocco by way of French. This linguistic disconnect further enunciates her cultural exile. The Dualistic nature of this exile is described when Setton writes, "... and I set pen to paper and begin the American novel—as interpreted by a Moroccan-Jewish immigrant girl. But I've been burned already, even though I'm barely 21. The first story I sent out returns with a rejection note: You write well. Next time try writing about the real Jews."⁴ Setton depicts her situation as that of the unwanted, or the ostracized, too "dark" in her "African" heart for America, and too Arab to be considered a "real Jew"

¹ Schroeter, Daniel J. "The Shifting Boundaries of Moroccan Jewish Identities." *Jewish Social Studies*. no. 1 (2008), 146.

² Scharfman, Ronnie. *The Other's Other: The Moroccan Jewish Trajectory of Edmond Amran El Maleh*. Yale French Studies, No. 82, Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations and Nomadisms, 138.

³ Ibid.

within the Eurocentric paradigm characteristic of the “Jewish identity”⁵—as constructed within the Zionist context, and as propagated by Ashkenazic Israel.

In his writings, el-Maleh fears the onset of the cultural amnesia experienced by Setton, and whereas el-Maleh is uprooted from his physical environment, Setton is uprooted from her identity. Both are exiled in their own way, but what unites their stories is this dualism and sense of being exiled from two angles, namely their physical exile from Morocco, as well as their exile from the newly constructed Jewish identity.

In the words of celebrated author and activist Christine Daure-Serfaty, the wife of Moroccan Jewish political activist Abraham Serfaty, a Christian French national, and a teacher in Tangier:

“Yet all of Morocco is truly cut off, isolated on the north by the Mediterranean, on the west by the Atlantic, on the south by an enormous desert plagued by war, and on the east by a long border that has remained closed for decades. On top of all that, Moroccans are cut off mentally by their strong feelings of identity and nationalism. They form an island, just like the Chinese must have during the Middle Empire. They’re convinced of their uniqueness, or at the very least of the uniqueness of both their misfortunes and windfalls. Travel and symposia have made little or no difference, because the inner wall that isolates Morocco’s thirty million inhabitants from the rest of the world is so thick. It’s an ancient wall, built to resist foreign invaders- from the early Portuguese and Turks right up to the more recent Spanish and French colonizers. In order to drive them back, the country closed itself off militarily

as best it could; but more importantly, it strengthened its own identity, cultivating a special kind of density as a means of fending off any new input from the vast world outside...”⁶

Morocco’s isolation, both physical and cultural, is the backdrop in which the Moroccan Jewish identity developed, and Jews are very much a major component of this environment. As a result of this phenomenon of dual colonialism experienced by Moroccan Jewry, the Moroccan Jewish identity, as expressed in Moroccan Jewish literature, can be characterized as a form of exile, assuming a dualistic nature, as previously mentioned.

Further, the historical narrative begins with the arrival of the French and the establishment of the French Protectorate in Morocco in 1912, and it ends with the mass Moroccan Jewish exodus beginning for the most part in the 1950’s and 60’s. This mass exodus of Moroccan Jewry can be described as the culmination of various factors and as a “complex process of political change in the twentieth century.”⁷ This article focuses on the dualistic nature of colonialism in Morocco; namely that of French colonial penetration via the AIU and Zionist influence in the years after Israeli independence in 1948. The objective of this article is to personalize, via Moroccan Jewish literature, the effects of this dualistic challenge to Moroccan Jewish identity, and to demonstrate how these challenges translate into cultural alienation.

The vehicle that drove French colonialism into the midst of Moroccan Jewry was the AIU. The AIU, though not intentionally, acted as the mediator between the

Moroccan Jewish communities and the French government, and served to bring the Jews closer culturally and politically to France, creating a rift between Moroccan Jewry and its Muslim counterpart. El-Maleh in his memoir, *Parcours immobile*, writes, in reference to the AIU’s influence on the Jewish population, “the children learning French, limited to the walls of the class, skimpy, like the skimpy suite worn by Ben Ruben (teacher from the AIU school), borrowed clothes, like the apron or the smock: The work of the Alliance Israélite, the work of France.”⁸ El-Maleh is expressing the existence of the political relationship between France and the AIU in his writings. El-Maleh clearly views the situation with contempt, as, due to this political affiliation between the AIU and the French protectorate, the AIU represents an arm of French colonial penetration in Morocco. Further, the AIU subsequently served as the vehicle in which Zionism staked its claim in Morocco, eventually leading many Moroccan Jews to immigrate to Israel.

Zionism, along with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, succeeded in the formation of a new Jewish identity, Eurocentric in nature, and exclusive of the Moroccan Jewish identity. Zionists in Morocco and the AIU initially were ideologically opposed in regards to the solution to the “Jewish question.” The Zionists believed Jews worldwide could only be emancipated if they uprooted themselves from the Diaspora and built a nation of their own. The AIU, on the other hand, saw these notions as destructive and were vehemently opposed to the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The AIU believed that the Jews could gain emancipation via

⁴ Ruth Knafo Setton, “10 Ways to Recognize a Sefardic Jewess,” *Best Contemporary Jewish Writing* (2001).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Christine Daure-Serfaty, *Letter from Morocco*, (Michigan State University Press), 54-55.

⁷ Daniel J. Schroeter, 147.

⁸ Edmond Amran El Maleh, “*Parcours immobile*,” (André Dimanche, Translated on my own, 2000) 26. “les enfants apprenaient le français, encore limité aux murs de la classe, étrié comme le complet-veston que portait Ben Ruben, vêtement d’emprunt comme le tablier ou la blouse: l’œuvre de l’Alliance israélite, l’œuvre de la France!”

assimilation, though towards the end of the Second World War the AIU capitulated with the Zionists by way of allowing them to utilize their schools to promote a Zionist agenda. Utilizing AIU archival sources, this article will demonstrate that Zionism and the AIU inadvertently collaborated in attempting to engender amongst Moroccan Jewish youth a sense of Jewish nationalism in order to prepare them for future immigration to Israel.

As reflected in Jewish Moroccan literature, this is a phenomenon that may be described as a sort of “exile from exile.” Israel may have been known “in their bones”⁹, but Morocco was known in their hearts. Below, Setton in her novel, *The Road to Fez*, describes the Zionist influence on Jews living amongst the Berbers, “Do you know that when the Zionists went to the Berber villages in the mountains and told the Jews about Israel, the villages emptied overnight? The next morning the Berbers searched the villages and couldn’t understand how the Jews could leave like that, in a second, give up everything they’d ever known, for a land they’d never seen...A land they’d never seen but that they knew in their bones...”¹⁰

Zionism in a religious sense, namely, the Messianic return to the land of Israel, existed as a purely spiritual aspiration in Morocco for as long as the Jewish tradition has been practiced in the region. Ever since Zionism was politicized at the Basel Conference in 1897, a rift developed between the AIU and the Zionists in Morocco. According to historian Michael Laskier,

“the conflict was clear: the AIU aspired to transform and liberate the Jews in their respective countries and what it would do was to fight for legislative reforms, bringing the Jews closer to France. The Zionists, on the other hand, called for the solution to the “Jewish problem” not through assimilation but rather by physically uprooting the Jews from the Diaspora and placing them in a homeland of their own. Such a solution was unacceptable to the AIU for quite some time.”¹¹

After the war, the destruction of European Jewry forced the AIU to capitulate with the Zionists and adapt their policies to accommodate their calling for a Jewish national homeland in Palestine.¹² Below is a translation of an official memorandum from 1953 located in the Alliance Israélite Universelle archives, which outlines the basic activities of The General Zionist Organization of Morocco.

“The General Zionist Organization of Morocco, which already employs much activity: By way of its youth movement Hanoar Hazioni (Zionist Youth) with more than 150 children, boys and girls, by its Hebrew courses and by its library in the French and Hebrew languages—and by its lecture room in which are available a number of newspapers and journals in the French and Hebrew language which are at the disposal of its members.

You are cordially invited to attend our first “Oneg Chabat” that will be held at the local “Charles Finzi Center”... Saturday, May 9th...where films on Israel will be screened.”¹³

It is clear from the memorandum that whereas before the AIU was anti-Zionist, the French education provided to Jews in Morocco is now being utilized as a tool to engender feelings of Jewish nationalism within Moroccan Jewish youths. According to Laskier, “theoretically, French education was intended to gear the youths toward accepting the notions of emancipation through assimilation. Yet the institutions of the AIU, which also taught Jewish values, had wide-ranging effects on the youths, often in contrast with the schools’ doctrinal motives.”¹⁴

Amidst their French education, Moroccan Jewish youths were attending Jewish youth programs celebrating Yom Haatzmaout, or Israeli Independence Day, in order to inspire a sense of national belonging with their coreligionists cultivating a new nation in Israel.¹⁵ Essentially, Moroccan Jewish identity, traditionally and distinctly steeped in the Sephardic Jewish tradition, is being reconfigured in several ways. A new linguistic, national, and cultural identity is being imposed on Jewish youths via Zionist organizations in collaboration with the AIU as Moroccan Jewish youths are instructed in Hebrew and exposed to Israeli culture. Thus, while Moroccan Jews are provided a French education representing one side of the challenge to their identity, they are receiving a second challenge by way of Zionist influence, and these two challenges characterize the dualistic nature of colonization experienced by Moroccan Jews.

⁹ Setton, 97-98.

¹⁰ Ibid, 97-98.

¹¹ Laskier, 195. ¹² Daniel J. Schroeter, 147.

¹² Ibid, 213.

¹³ Organisation des sionistes généraux du Maroc: “L’organisation des sionistes généraux du Maroc qui déploie déjà une grande activité: par son mouvement de jeunesse Hanoar Hazioni qui compte plus de 150 enfants, garçons et filles- par ses cours d’hébreu- par sa bibliothèque en langue française et hébraïque- et par sa salle de lecture ou de nombreux journaux et revues juifs en langue française et hébraïque sont à la disposition de ses membres. Vous êtes cordialement invité à assister à notre premier “omegh Chabat” qui sera donné dans son local “Centre Charles Finzi” 165, Bld des Régiments Coloniaux, le Samedi 9 Mai à 18 heures au cours duquel des films sur Israël seront projetés.”

¹⁴ Laskier, 218-219.

¹⁵ Hélène Cazes-Bénatar, *Alliance Israelite Universelle*, Casablanca, le 29 Avril 1953. Alliance Israelite Universelle Archives.

Jewish youths were being prepared through AIU-sponsored Hebrew programs designed to immerse Jewish youths in Hebrew in preparation for immigration to Israel. "In June 1952 twelve students completed the courses of the Ecole Normale Hébraïque, receiving French teaching diplomas as teachers of Hebrew."¹⁶ According to Laskier, it "was about time that the AIU made Morocco the testing ground for its Hebrew education program through the creation in 1946...of the Ecole Normale Hébraïque in Casablanca."¹⁷ While the AIU prepared Moroccan Jews for assimilation in general, Zionism made significant inroads in the Moroccan Jewish community throughout the years, prompting many to eventually immigrate to Israel.

Before 1939, despite Jewish immigration to Palestine being weak in comparison with later years, Jewish immigration enraged the AIU. After many Jews previously inhabiting Fez left for Palestine, the AIU blamed their departure on Zionist propaganda as well as French ineptitude in improving the living conditions within the Mellah of Fez. The AIU proceeded to appeal to the French government to allow Jews to buy land outside the old city, as well as for permission to open retail stores within the Arab quarter, in order to augment the socioeconomic position of the Jews of Fez. The purpose of these reforms was to combat the increasing Zionist presence in the country, and thus to make life more

appealing to the Jews of Fez so they would not leave for Palestine.¹⁸

While the AIU's intent was to improve Moroccan Jewish life in order to prevent Jews from leaving, the progress they did make in improving the lives of Jews essentially resulted in the deterioration of Muslim-Jewish relations. The Zionist influence, on the other hand, succeeded in providing many Jews the option of leaving for Palestine, but at the same time alienated them further from their Muslim counterparts. Again, these two aspects are characteristic of the dual nature of colonization experienced by Moroccan Jews. As reflected in Setton's writings, Israel and Zionism became one and the same in Morocco after 1948, and Jew was equated with Zionist in the eyes of the Muslim masses. Below, Setton writes,

"Mani says, 'I work with Arabs all day at the factory. Sometimes a whole day goes by, even two, and we're just people, brothers, doing our work, laughing at the same jokes. Then the news comes on the radio. Someone mentions Israel, and the mood turns ugly. Eyes that were friendly a minute ago watch me. Most Jews I know won't even go into work whenever anything happens in Israel. How long can we live with that kind of fear?'"¹⁹

This passage enunciates the feelings of Moroccan Jews, which prompted them to leave their home country for Israel. From Setton's writings, it appears that Moroccan Jews are not particularly thrilled about leaving their home, but, at the

same time, living without constant fear would be a better alternative.

In an AIU file, the recreation of a Jewish identity within a Zionist context is apparent. Ruben Tajouri, a French-educated Jew of Libyan descent who was a dominant individual in the development of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Morocco, received an invitation to Paris.²⁰ The invitation was from a French committee in charge of memorializing the Jewish martyr of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and Tajouri was invited to participate as follows:

"We have the honor to inform you that the date of the first stone laying ceremony of the Tomb of the Unknown Jewish Martyr has been set for next Sunday, May 17th, a date that coincides with the 10th anniversary of the last battles, glorious and tragic, of the Warsaw ghetto."²¹

Tajouri's reply is as follows,

"I am very touched by your attention and thank you. To my great regret, I will not be able to come to Paris on the date indicated for many reasons of occupation in need of attention at my office during this time of the school year. Please excuse my absence."²²

This exchange of an invitation and a response is indeed rather simple, but it brings to light certain questions. Firstly, what connection besides religion does Tajouri, a Jew of Libyan decent, have with the martyrs of the Warsaw Ghetto

¹⁶ Ibid, 214.

¹⁷ Ibid, 97-98.

¹⁸ Ibid, 211.

¹⁹ Ibid, 213.

²⁰ Mohammed Kenbib, "Tajouri (Tadjouri), Ruben." Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World. Executive Editor Norman A. Stillman. Brill Online, 2013. Reference. 24 March 2013 www.referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/tajouri-tadjouri-ruben-SIM_0020870.

²¹ Letter from the Comité Mondial to Monsieur R. Tajouri, Délégué de l'A.I.U. Rue Eléonore-Fournier Casablanca (Maroc): Nous avons l'honneur de vous informer que la date de la pose solennelle de la première pierre du Tombeau du Martyr Juif Inconnu a été fixée au Dimanche 17 Mai prochain, date qui coïncide avec le 10ème anniversaire des derniers combats, glorieux et tragiques, du ghetto de Varsovie."

²² Letter from the Comité Mondial to Monsieur R. Tajouri, Délégué de l'A.I.U. Rue Eléonore-Fournier Casablanca (Maroc): Reply from R. Tajouri: "Je suis très sensible à votre aimable attention et vous en remercie vivement. A mon très grand regret, je ne pourrai me rendre à Paris à la date indiquée en raison des multiples occupations qui me sont créées par ma charge à cette époque de l'année scolaire et vous prie en conséquence de bien vouloir excuser mon absence. Le personnel de l'Alliance Israélite au Maroc et moi-même serons avec vous en pleine communion de pensée et de sentiments au jour de la cérémonie, en cette date du 17 Mai coïnciant avec le 11ème anniversaire de la glorieuse défense du Ghetto de Varsovie."

uprising? The invitation is a clear gesture of solidarity on the part of the French Zionist Federation, though, in declining the invitation, whether out of necessity or not, Tajouri is maintaining the wall that divides the two worlds; Morocco and the outside world, as described by Christine Daure-Serfaty. Therefore, such gestures of Jewish solidarity, noble as they may be, perhaps have a difficult time crossing the ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries that separate the Moroccan Jewish world with the European Jewish world.

In conclusion, colonialism played a profound role in restructuring and reconfiguring the social, political and cultural makeup of the broader Middle East. Moroccan Jewry, an indigenous Middle Eastern community, was uprooted from its traditional home as a result of this large-scale reconfiguration of the broader Middle East. The result of these challenges to the Moroccan Jewish identity was the creation of an identity characterized by exile and alienation. In the case of el-Maleh,

who writes from Paris, he is forced to leave his home, the very land he fought to emancipate from French rule, and at the same time, in a more ideological sense, he is exiled from Israel. Setton, on the other hand, is robbed of her identity and grows up in America, “rootless,” and “sprouted from nowhere,” and never really fitting in with the “real Jews”.²³ Thus, what el-Maleh feared, namely Moroccan Jewish cultural amnesia, Setton experiences as a Moroccan Jew exiled from both her Moroccan cultural identity as well as the newly created Jewish identity centered in Ashkenazic Israel. Setton describes this sense of cultural alienation in her novel writing,

“When I look back into our past as Moroccan Jews, it’s dark, like the mellah (Jewish quarter). A dark line, broken by glimpses of sun. A friend from Paris told me once, you come to Morocco to forget. We suffer from a sort of cultural amnesia. We forget what happened to us yesterday, the coming and going of the French, the dynasties of Sultans. A great blur of darkness buries us.”²⁴

Finally, the aspiration of this article is to open the forum in regards to certain questions of identity in general, and the dualistic nature of exile discussed in this article is only one question in the broader examination of the complex phenomenon of identity. Identity is a major theme in my honors thesis, and I hope to continue my research in the future and focus my work on broader notions of identity and the ways in which identity is affected by various factors, such as colonialism, as is the case in this article.

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²³ Ruth Knafo Setton, “The Road to Fez”, 13.

²⁴ Setton, 85.